



CHANGING TRENDS IN THEMES FOR CHILDREN'S STORIES

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"Pollute and perish or conserve and flourish," "Boys and girls are equal," "Genetic engineering to bring about mutations resulting in perfect breeds..." DNA factors; human clones, microchips that yield a world of knowledge in 00 nano seconds. . .

Talking of literature for a generation that has such clarion calls and such benefits of science to aid it would indeed seem a timid attempt to try and impose the world of words on a world of super automation. But man has not become a machine yet—the convincing portrayals in that direction of our very own writer fraternity notwithstanding—and so, as long as there is a human heart out there, there will be books. Books that will lead kindly from one century into another, the world of one scientific generation into

another. And children's books? Perhaps they will be the only kind of literature left for mankind to 'experience' at first hand. When the adult has reduced his volumes and tomes to a comma and a dot in the binary system of super-computers, no amount of 3-D or personal computers is going to give the child the inexplicable joy of handling, fondling and learning from the first picture-book he or she has access to. It will be a long time before the printed word, the colourful picture, and the personal experience of having a book could be replaced by any other method of initiating the child into the world of knowledge. Which is what brings us to the changing trends.

Literature, the mirror of society, the fore-caster of the future, must move on, even

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as it has from times past to times present, and times present to times future. What should egg us on then, should be those very factors, the growth of children's stories from word of mouth to printed literature and the evergreen appeal of some of the oldest, but perhaps even today, the most enjoyable stories. Our earliest known 'literature' was the *Panchatantra* and *Hito-pedasha*, our earliest literary heritage the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Consider the situation today, almost five thousand years later, "has age withered or custom staled their infinite variety?" This in spite of the video cassettes, comic strips, film versions of the same. One glance at the catalogues of children's book publishers in India and chances are that all, repeat all of them, will have the epics and the *Panchatantra* on their lists.

The point made here at the outset is that when speaking of changing trends in themes for children's literature, the purview of this paper will be literature written by Indian writers for Indian children in English, and the influences on this literature and on the writers of children's literature, published in English abroad. We are not speaking of obsolete literature—if ever there can be such a thing. We shall, in fact, during the course of this paper, dwell on the evolution of a recognisable genre that we term today as children's literature. This purports to be, therefore, a study of the happy amalgam of all that was available as literature for children, outside the purview of the school curriculum, and all that was added to it make it a more wholesome, contemporary, even futuristic assemblage.

Chronologically speaking, records would be available to show which book or books came when and which set what trend. So we have the earliest folk-tales, folk lore, typical of each culture, Hindu, Greek, ethics, followed by the *Panchatantra*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Aesop's animal fab-

les or stories with a moral. Then came the fantasy, the fairies, hobgoblins, gnomes, leprechauns and back again to more stories of boys and girls in their natural environment in school and at home. Children again began to matter in the stories behaviourally, so there were stories of the naughty child, the good child, the bad child. These, in fact, because very popular themes for profusely illustrated books — presumably for the youngest age-group and came to be termed as picture-books, which the child could, may be not read for himself, but enjoy through the pictures.

These rapidly took over from the didactic/the moral stories. It was easy to portray a naughty monkey, or stubborn donkey, or playful puppy and show through pictures how their actions often resulted in situations that were true of the toddler's life, and how the reaction, usually the punishment, that the personalized animal received, could be something out of the child's own life! Slowly, even the themes for picture-books started to seem hackneyed and not in keeping with the needs of the day. When controversy raged over the world about equal rights for women, the Children's Book Trust (CBT) made bold to join hands with UNICEF over the issue and daringly launched a competition, the theme for which was "Boys and girls are equal." Of the two age-groups for which manuscripts were invited one was the age-group 5 to 8 years. Judging by some of the books like, *The Girl who Wasn't Built Right*, one feels that the writers had not only understood what was required but had very successfully and in a manner and language suited to picture-books, managed to do justice to the theme.

Of late, however, picture-books too seem to have exhausted their stock of themes. It is only a temporary phenomenon, however, and picture-books are sure to emerge the winners once themes ideally suited to their make-up are back. In fact, the day is

not far away when all the much-loved nursery rhyme picture-books, the animal stories will return with a vengeance, when the cycle goes full circle and picture-books come back to be what they are—beginning books for child readers and not vehicles for adult themes to be served to children as watered down versions. Picture-books, in turn, yielded to the slightly exaggerated situations of mystery stories geared to make little heroes and heroines out of the main characters. Which sort of brings us on the threshold of the scene at present. Does it seem as though centuries of significant, well-loved literature have been brushed away in just a couple of sentences? Quite true, Paeans of writing about the children's literature of the past will not do justice to the veritable wealth left to us by those here before us. The point to be noted is that though each trend or kind of literature that emerged at a particular time or enjoyed peak popularity then, it did not, in any way, diminish the glory or popularity of the other kinds that were there before it.

The happy coexistence of mythology, folk lore, fairy-tales, parables, short stories, fantasy, adventure, historical fiction, science-fiction and non-fiction wafted the child reader gently from one stage of development on to another gradually, gently, surely, and each became complementary to the other. It is against this chequered backdrop that we will talk of changing trends. More specifically for me, I think my talk will rely heavily on the experiences I have culled over the past decade in the Children's Book Trust as a writer and editor of children's writing, both for books as well as for the magazines.

The pioneering role that the CBT has played in the history of children's literature, soon after Independence, especially in the English language is only too well-known, but bears some repetition. The

paucity of good books for children led to the setting up of the Children's Book Trust. Mr. Shankar's immense love for children and his unshakeable belief in their creative abilities led the famous cartoonist to give up his calling as a political cartoonist in favour of writing for children. And even as he went on to write original, unforgettable books like *Life with Grandfather*, *Mother is Mother*, *Sujata* and *The Wild Elephant*, he recognised the need for the rewriting of our classics, and simultaneously came out with well-written, well-produced versions of mythology, historical tales, folk-tales, *Panchatantra* stories, tales from the classics and so on.

Nevertheless, it could only be a man of Mr. Shankar's foresight, who realised that this was not enough. "Never put manure at the top of the tree, but at its base," he is very fond of quoting the Malayalam saying, and he better than anyone else, went about it in a systematic way. Through the Shankar's International Children's Writing Competition, he got an annual picture of how children thought, wrote and reacted the world over and knew that winds of change must indeed start making themselves felt in the literature being made available to them. Soon after, the Writers Workshop was organized by him. To scout for fresh talent in writing for children, he began the annual competition for writers of children's books. Here was a serious forum at last, which genuine writers of children's literature could turn to. There were definite categories, definite age-groups, well-defined expectations from a manuscript. This may sound regimental and rigid—but at that time, in that vacuum, it was a definite step in a definite direction. Most entrants to the competition were grateful for the specific categories of Fiction / Non-fiction / Science fiction / Historical fiction / Natural History / Picture-books, and the categories helped them to think

of their target readers too. So, this, above all, was a trend in itself, set in motion by Mr. Shankar in 1978. At the seminars organised on the subject ten years ago, to mark the International Year of the Child, the need of the day, the cry, the plea was "better books for children."

Today in 1989, we can proudly say we do have better books for children—now what better can we give them? But the hallmark of childhood is growth. And if you have given children better, then the thing to remember is, soon they will require the best. Ever since I came into the profession, I have been hearing a lot about the Enid Blyton clones. Not of the author herself but her books. Either some MS was too Enid Blyton's or a poor baby's Enid Blyton. As an editor, I confess to recognise the symptoms—but as a child who has grown up perfectly happily on *Malory Towers* and *Famous Five and Secret Seven*, I must protest. These books hold the same freshness and provide easy reading today as then. So, if today's children complain of too much Enid Blyton stuff, then the fault surely is not the author's but that of the imitators who have cashed in on her "success" formula ad nauseam. To some extent, even the authors could not be blamed. They were into a good thing and they flowed with the tide. The tide, as we all know, is a treacherous phenomenon. It ebbs and flows with a will all its own. The wise authors were the ones who used this formula to recreate something that was refreshing, appealing, and at the same time, revealing.

The winds of welcome change were blown in the "Indian writing in English for children" scene in 1979 with the publication of the book *The Kaziranga Trail*. It not only won for the author the first prize in the first competition for Writers of Children's Books, but also the Shankar's Gold Medal for the best work of fiction

brought out during the Year of the Child. On the surface, the plot was predictable. There were poachers in the sanctuary, hunting rhinos illegally. There were the three boys who discovered the dead rhino minus its horn, and who as per pattern must be the ones to bring the poachers to book. It happens slightly differently in *The Kaziranga Trail*, and there lies the rub. For the difference has meant everything to discerning readers. The first few sentences of the book establish the atmosphere of the sanctuary, even send a thrill down the spine through the pages of the book as the mystery part becomes more and more gripping. The inherent descriptions of flora-fauna, local (Assamese) beliefs, (of *bhoots* and *djins*), local herbal cures and so on have been so neatly integrated into the main plot that children are treated not only to another mystery story in a new setting, but are transported into a whole new world where nothing jars or sticks out.

The translation of this book into many Indian and foreign languages and its having been made into a film too, speak volumes for the popularity of the book. Fortunately for the readers, the author, Arup Kumar Dutta could maintain this high standard in all the books that followed. Being closely associated with the editing of *The Blind Witness*, *Revenge*, *The Lure of Zangrilla*, up to the latest *Smack*, I found in each novel consistency of character, time, place and events so well-maintained, that along with a well-delineated plot, a thrilling mystery story, one had been introduced to a completely new atmosphere, maybe even a familiar one—but with nuances to it—you would have never suspected they existed. So it is that you learn of the sensitivity and special senses that a blind person can have in *The Blind Witness*, In *Lure of Zangrilla* even as you take in the breath-taking moments of climbing a dangerous, beautiful mountain, you learn

of the little niggling feelings of jealousy and one-upmanship, of cut-throat competition, that is so much on the rise these days. In *Revenge*, you learn about the laws of the jungle and how the cruelty of man must also bow its head sooner or later. *Smack* handles feelingly a sensitive and difficult-to-tackle subject like drug trafficking. Here you learn that however treacherous the underworld, and however ugly the face of poverty, there are still values like loyalty, service to mankind, and a desire to uproot evil left in mankind, be they rich or poor, in uniform or out of it. If there is a 'doctor' who has no compunctions about supplying drugs on the sly, then there is a doctor who serves on, unmindful, selflessly in the filthy bylanes, trying to relieve and if possible cure an addict of this fatal habit.

There are other books too in this genre and room for many more like these, for such are the books that would in some measure satisfy the questioning hunger of the child readers of today and tomorrow. No longer is the burning desire only to be entertained. Along with it is a quest for knowledge, reasoning, psycho-analysis too—if you would have it. The mystery scene had to shift from the predictable theft or robbery in the neighbourhood from smuggled this and lost that to more convincing portrayals of such adventures. The *raison d'être* of the story became all important, not the mere plot. Why did a character behave in a particular way? What were the circumstances that turned the person to crime? Could the clues that had been found by the main characters be relied upon? The little mind reading these books had so mastered the art of mystery-solving, thanks to the Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot that they had graduated to, that it was an opportune moment for the psychoanalytic approach to be tackled by the Indian writers in English. Authors like Arup Kumar Dutta, Niharika Joshi, Simren

Kaur, Nilima Sinha and several others made a success of their books only because bearing all these elements in mind, they wrote about situations and locations with which they were absolutely familiar, and instead of superimposing an adventure in such a backdrop, chose to write about adventure that arose from within the set-up. A trend of sorts in itself.

The last two decades of any century have tended to place a heavy burden on literature. All the scientific, historic, sociological, political, psychological implications, whatever they be in the actual world, tend to get magnified in the literary world, as an attempt to picture a futuristic society is made. The watchwords of the 20th century have been 'instant' and 'super'. We are in the age of instant information and super computers. The rapid strides of technological advancement could hardly be ignored by writers of children's books. On the one hand, there was a flood of information books and articles, a landmark of sorts being CBT's 1979 competition prize-winner for Non-fiction, *You and the Computer*. An extremely well-written MS was sent in by a professor in the Indian Institute of Technology in Madras. The book, nevertheless, called for a lot of research, but the end-product was so good, the revised and expanded version is still a best-seller. Simply written, it gave the reader an exact picture of computer hardware—quite literally, it told them how a computer works. Its publication preceded the Government's CLASS (Computer Literacy) programme by a good ten years or so. An ideal example of literature preparing society for the future. But it cannot always be like that. Sometimes the simples, the centuries old, the taken-for-granted phenomena can baffle. What makes the watch go tic-toc? What brings colour to the TV screen? How do several telephones operate simultaneously? Articles of daily use

are operated by the flick of a switch, yet we know so little about how they work. It was necessary that these questions too be answered, and CBT's how-it-works-series fulfilled this void to some extent.

But the purview of this paper is changing trends in children's literature, and it is not always possible for realistic books, or non-fiction to bring about change. Science, non-fiction technology have to be blended with the imaginative in order to have a lasting impact on society. What are the sociological implications of making computers a part of our day-to-day life? If, as shown in *You And The Computer*, soon the day would come when we shall do our shopping sitting in our rooms ordering, buying, paying — all through the computer. Then what kind of social life will we have? That should be our concern today.

On the other, and more significantly, this is what resulted in an outbreak of what we call science-fiction. Although the choice of subjects for science-fiction still relies heavily on its probe for alien creatures, and the strange encounters of humans with them, or of human spaceships getting lost in time or space, the approach of the 21st century has brought technological and clinical advancements into children's literature too. Computers are a part and parcel of children's lives today. But apart from their academic and industrial use, can they become the protagonist in a children's story? Very much so! The newer the technology, the newer the crimes it can commit. A fairly recent book published by the CBT *Caught by Computer* by Ira Saxena met with little editorial approval as a MS. But polished and refined, the book makes a significant comment on the society of the future though it is obvious that the author had nothing but light-hearted entertainment in mind. Centring around a computer crime, it just showed how an eighth class boy could outwit his captors

only because he was computerwise and they were *not*! Unwittingly, the author had barred the scene of the future—a society in which, with heavy reliance on computers, and easy access by all to the software available—it would be hard to distinguish between child and adult—for not degree, but the level of "software awareness," to coin a new term, and its applications would determine your utility value. With the basic computer knowledge, any child could master the other languages or programmes and systems, if he so willed, just as Anshuman Chaudhuri had in *Caught by Computer*. It was this knowledge that made editing the MS and shaping it into a racy, readable adventure quite a challenge for me.

Two more exciting comments on the society of the future came our way as stories contributed to the magazine, *Children's World*, and it was particularly satisfying personally, to be able to process them because both were very well-written stories for children. Their primary aim was to entertain, and yet the social comment came through so unobtrusively, naturally and effectively that in discerning readers, it would have a longer lasting impact than any of the legislations governments of the world may pass on the subject, or any number of papers or debates or seminars would ever have no children. The first story was titled "The Age of Daughters" and was written by Dilip Raote. Set sometime in a future that we can recognise, it talks of a time when girls become very valuable because there are so few of them left. To quote, "Grandparents were the *bhoots* and ogres and dragons of boys' nightmares. They had wanted sons, sons and more sons. And now there seemed to be ten boys to one preening ambitious, vengeful girl." The last few epithets, because boys were denied opportunities for higher study and so on. In this case too, the aim of the story was to very casually nudge us, the child

readers and those who cared into an awareness of the repercussions our desire of today have on the world tomorrow.

Many would say that this is an exaggerated reading of a story that is otherwise purporting to talk of the same evils that haunt our society even today—except that the tables have been turned on the boys. In this story, the girls are groom-hunting now, demanding fat dowries, *pujas* are being performed on a lavish scale—somewhere out there in a space city. When examining the story for publication, we discussed all these points editorially. Yes, those were regressive factors in the story, but in the ultimate analysis, the point being made was loud, clear and unmistakable. Winds of change can only be ushered in by moving from the familiar to the unfamiliar, that too gently, subtly. That would be the truly effective way of true literature. To take a stand or to pass judgement would again mean that we were moralising or raising banners that are here today, gone tomorrow. Literature, after all, seeks to make lasting changes for the better. Clarion calls, voices of the age, merely give way to newer clarion calls, newer causes, newer voices.

The other story was quite simply titled, "It's A Dog's Life." For long it lay in the files, because we felt it was too philosophical, too imposing and too sad or rather too stark for children. Yet, we could not bear to return it to the author, there was something somewhere in it that was meant for children, we felt. It was they who should be made aware of the warning signs, of the possible misuse of advanced scientific knowledge. The story is a simple first person narration of how man had made for himself a perfect breed of long-living dogs through the process of mutation. The sentiment of loneliness "of our two breeds being destined to live in loneliness," are so poignantly and humanely expressed, that

the last paragraph comes as a shock—it is the dog who had been telling you all this! Again, on the surface, this is just another well-delineated pen-sketch, a master-stroke by an author. But, as editors sitting in judgement, weighing the pros and cons of why something should be published, why certain hunches should be backed, becomes necessary because of what one finds written between the lines.

Also, because the time has come when we have to ask the question, "Do we give children what they need or do we continue to allow them to read whatever we write and produce?" These two stories certainly posed questions about a future society about which children are curious. They know it is to be their world—but today, they are not making it. It will be the consequence of our deeds, as conscious adults today, that will go into the making of their world of tomorrow. And like a warning beacon light, their growing awareness of science, their half-in-training knowledge cautions them to ask of us these questions, coerces us into holding a mirror to the future. How far we succeed remains to be seen. But it would not be right to abandon all efforts merely because the guess does not provide hundred per cent correct answers! These two stories certainly provided it. But it would be a terrible misnomer to presume that editors would sit with their noses constantly sniffing the ground to single out message stories or 'futuristic' stories or "trend-setters." Frankly, such stories just happen along. They can rarely be assigned or commissioned, or consciously plotted and written. It is only when the essence of the era has been absorbed thoroughly that it can be expressed as a spontaneous overflow, to borrow Wordsworth's oft-quoted line.

That is why a word of caution at the tail-end. Are we going overboard with our burning concern for the environment? Bad

enough that it is a denuded world that we are bequeathing our children. Must we also rub it in further by handing them a bushel of epithets? Certainly, that is not the role of literature—of Master Sermonisers? What do we expect our writers to contribute when we ask to write environmentally aware stories? Is it enough to say “plant more trees?” Or write stories about a couple of children making this happen in a story? Or is it enough to describe cleaning-up operations in a river? Or saying, “save that animal, make a sanctuary for it, it is on the verge of extinction?” If we claim to be environmentally aware, then we should know this is not enough. This is what those scientifically involved with each aspect of the environment must do, are doing—the clarion calls are just part of their very many tools with which they are trying to save the ecology. I am sure they do not expect to hear from us mere echoes of their warnings. The best way an author could contribute towards environment awareness would be, to my thinking, to be natural about Nature. There must be some environment that you know originally, as your very own, something you’re grown-up with and which has changed since, for the better or worse. Cannot that be incorporated into your psyche so that it comes about naturally in your literature?

Environmentalists tell us that planting more trees does not change the ecology. If you uproot a forest, it is a forest you must replant. For, it is a forest that is a community of living beings. What we can give our children then, is a rich storehouse of stories that are written against a backdrop that is environmentally rich. The environment unspoilt as perhaps we may have known it, since we cannot bring back Nature totally, let us recreate it in our stories with the rightful place of the flora and fauna given its due importance. At least if in our stories we could recreate the en-

vironment for our readers as it was then, there is a glimmer of hope that with a clear picture of what the world should be like, when they begin putting this huge jigsaw puzzle together again, they will know what they are setting out to achieve. My very first story was a light-hearted one about a baby-monkey who escaped the *Madari*’s net and broke his leg instead, and how he was rescued by a vet, saved and returned to his original family and how he still continued to be friends with the vet. Not consciously an environmentally aware story, but perhaps there was something to it after all. So also in another story “Well—Well,” a chick is saved from becoming the subject of a scientific experiment. The point being made is that it is easy to fall prey to all that is popular, loudly-touted and instantly successful in your age. But if you really wish to survive the here and now as a writer, the thing to do is to give a go by to the media. Agreed we lived in a world of media blitzkrieg, of instant formulas, of sales surveys and success rates of readership barometers, and what have you.

“Children deserve the best!” “Better books for children.” All worthy slogans in themselves, but easier said than done. We speak of the reading habit in children. How can we or our books help them to increase or improve their reading habit? Until and unless books can attract their attention, and once attracted, sustain their interest in books, we would be failing in our duty towards them. Their interest can be sustained if we know in what their interest lies. Author? Subject? Theme? Presentation? Or a happy combination of all these? We have to subtly feel the pulse of what children think is best for them and then decide how best we can give them that—in what form and how best it is suited to their needs.

A writer needs must follow many trends only to set her own!